



American
Alliance of
Museums

The Reinvention of AAM: A Case Study

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How AAM Remade Its Business Model and Reconnected with Its Membership

Throughout the spring and summer of 2012, staffers at the American Association of Museums had been spending so much time huddling in a small conference room at their Washington, D.C., headquarters that they dubbed it “the war room.”

The windowless enclave had become “a place where we had constant meetings,” says Janet Vaughan, the nonprofit’s vice president of membership and excellence. Vaughan and a half dozen other association employees served on an implementation team coordinating a top-to-bottom relaunch of AAM. They were working to reinvent its membership model; deploy a new technology infrastructure and an entirely new website; expand and simplify the decades-old process of accrediting museums; restructure a loose-knit collection of almost two dozen professional networking groups within the association; and launch a new name and logo. The team members and their colleagues felt that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to transform the organization.

It was an intense period of transition for the 106-year-old AAM. The membership rolls had been in decline since 2000, and financial losses had been exacerbated by the economic meltdown that began in 2008. Outreach and member retention campaigns were ineffectual. Put simply, Vaughan says, “members were finding it increasingly difficult to justify the value of belonging.”

As with a political campaign, there was a finish line that everyone was sprinting toward: the first week of September 2012. “We had a lot of support, but we were moving really quickly,” recalls Vaughan. “Basically it felt like we were jumping off a cliff holding hands.” None of the denizens of the war room could predict the outcome; a series of far-less-dramatic tweaks and institutional reorganizations over the past several years had made little difference.



The association’s headquarters are just a few blocks from the White House, and AAM tended to think of itself as another Washington institution that had built up

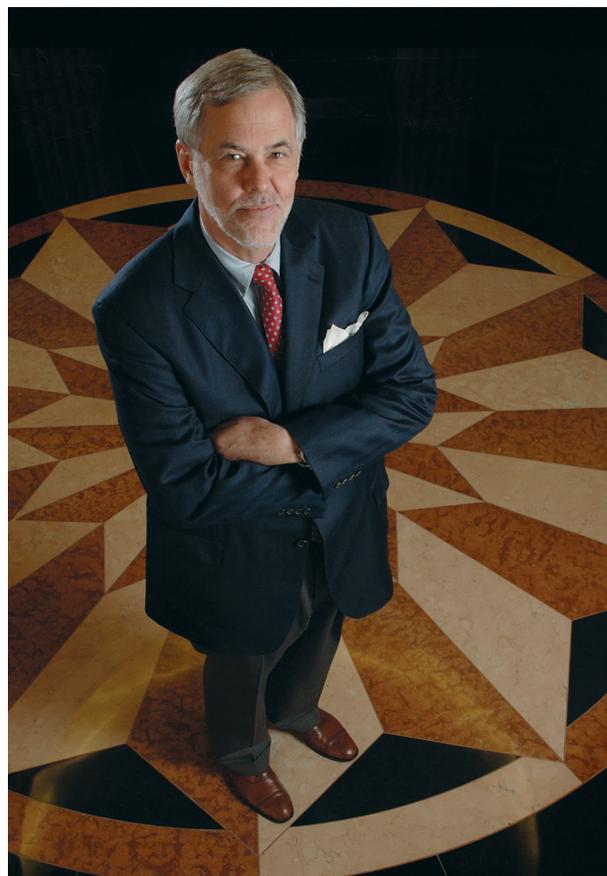
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significant stature and influence since its creation in 1906—the undisputed leader of the museum field. It published directories, codes of ethics and a bimonthly magazine. It managed the industry’s major annual meeting and expo, which attracted more than 5,000 attendees from 50 different countries. And it supervised a rigorous accreditation process that was the gold standard for the field. Museums that had earned accreditation ranged from the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository in Alaska to the San Diego Zoo, from the Guggenheim Museum in New York to Iolani Palace in Hawaii. In 2006, the membership numbered around 19,000 museums and individuals.

But when a new president arrived at AAM in mid-2007, it was becoming clear that the organization’s sense of itself was not shared by museums and museum professionals.

“Our value proposition was that we were the national association that represents all museums, and therefore you should belong,” says Ford Bell, below, a veterinarian and professor who had previously been CEO of the Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation, a medical research organization, and board chair at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. But Bell says that many museums felt they were getting more from a sector-specific association like the Association of Children’s Museums or a regional association like the Western Museums Association. His assessment, shortly after taking over as president: “We were on a path to irrelevancy, and I think AAM’s board knew it. The big question was, what are we doing of value? We didn’t have a lot of time to come up with an answer.”

Replacing a president who had served for two decades, Bell arrived just in time for a paralyzing recession. Many museums laid off staff as public funding sources and private philanthropy dried up. Some watched their endowments shrink, cut their hours or considered deaccessioning items. Others closed altogether. And AAM wasn’t immune: there were layoffs and hiring freezes. In 2009, there was a week-long furlough and a



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temporary halt in contributions to retirement accounts.

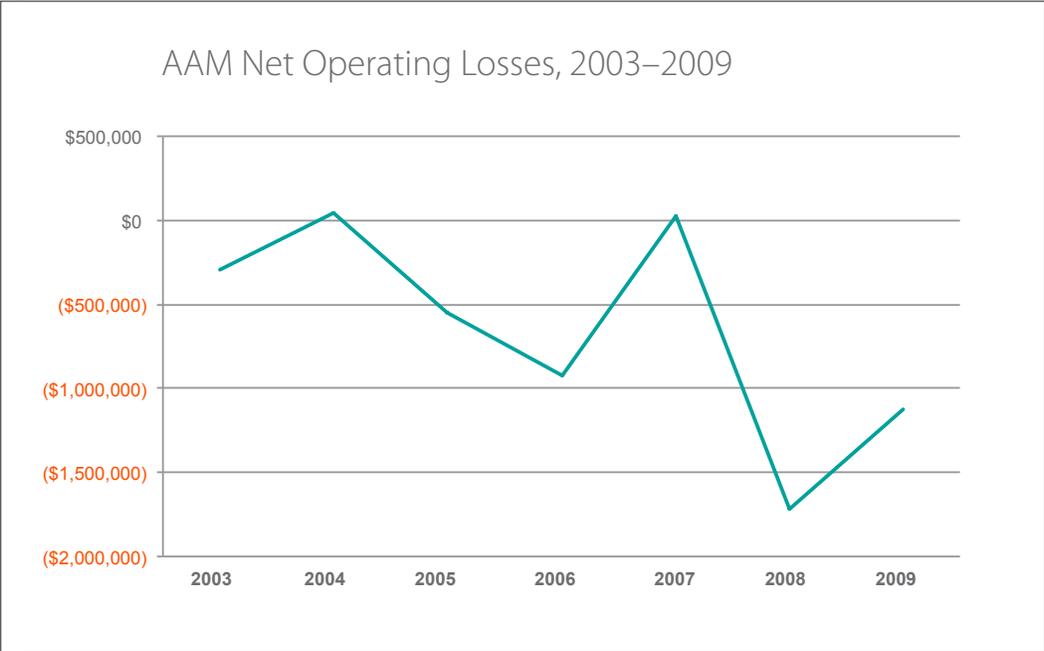
Long-time AAM employees describe an organizational culture during that period with little collaboration or communication across departments, and with each group fighting to win and then protect its annual budget allocation—doing its own thing without much thought to the overall strategy. “There was no sense that we were all part of one organization,” says Marjie George, AAM’s director of member services. Even with fewer than 65 employees, AAM was factionalized enough that employees in one department might not know their colleagues down the hall.

Shortly after taking the position, Bell began taking regular trips, visiting dozens of museums around the country each year. “We were viewed as the far-off organization in Washington that was not relevant to people’s daily concerns,” he says. “I felt it was important to get out. I started showing up, and so did my colleagues. We needed to be approachable and accessible.” Bell visited not just AAM’s top-tier members, which paid dues of \$15,000 a year, but also tiny ones like the Walter Anderson Museum of Art, located in Ocean Springs, Mississippi. It has a staff of three, but is AAM accredited.

All of a sudden it seemed like Bell was everywhere, says Gary Johnson, president of the Chicago History Museum. “We invited him to come to our Museum Day at the Illinois General Assembly, and he came. I was rather surprised he said yes. And if he comes to ours, that means he comes to those all over the country.”

When visiting museums, Bell got an earful: many members felt that AAM wasn’t doing enough to justify the price of membership. Others complained about the “cumbersome and time-consuming process” of going through accreditation, Bell says. “Nobody had looked at that process in 40 years.”

And back in Washington, when Bell tried to get a handle on AAM’s financial state, he says it felt like “trying to grab butter—I couldn’t get answers to anything.” He brought in an accounting consultant from BDO to analyze the association’s finances and recruited Laura Lott, a senior executive from National Geographic, to become AAM’s first official chief financial officer.



“The budget at AAM was positioned as a break-even budget,” says Lott, who also serves as chief operating officer. “But at the end of the year—oops—they’d miss it. And it would happen again the next year.” Lott’s analysis found that AAM was spending an average of \$600,000 a year from its reserves. In 2009, the worst year, AAM was \$1.1 million in the red. “We had about five years before we’d essentially go out of business,” she says.

Inside the organization, Lott “really forced the issue—she forced us to acknowledge the reality,” says Vaughan. The slow slide in membership numbers had long been ignored, but this was an existential threat. The choice, Vaughan says, was “either go out by the drip method or shake things up considerably.”



One of many wake-up calls for AAM came in the midst of the worsening recession, as Congress hammered out stimulus legislation. AAM’s influence on Capitol Hill came into question as elected officials considered whether museums ought to be eligible for stimulus funds. Ultimately museums were added to the list of those eligible for money through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, but zoos and aquariums were not. The inclusion of museums was regarded as a win for AAM—President Obama signed the legislation at the Denver Museum of Nature &

Science—but the difficulties highlighted the need for the entire field to speak with one voice. There were many other policy issues important to museums that came before the House and Senate, but, Vaughan says, “We didn’t take a stand or issue position papers.”

At the same time, social networks like LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter were making it easier for professionals in the museum field to connect online and communicate with each other; in-person meetings organized by an association like AAM were no longer the only game in town.

Inside AAM, staffers were finally acknowledging that they were competing with more than 60 state and discipline-specific associations for revenue. And yet there weren’t many effective marketing efforts to bring in new members or persuade lapsed members to re-up. “When a member forgot to pay an invoice, no one called them, and there were no reminders,” says George, the director of member services. “It was like no one noticed.” And within AAM, there were nearly two dozen professional networks (known as Standing Professional Committees and Professional Interest Committees), focused on roles such as fundraising, education or collections, that operated like their own mini nonprofits, collecting fees on their own.

The different departments at AAM felt like “we had to fight for budgets, and then there wasn’t much cooperation—it was just ‘mine, mine, mine,’” says Julie Hart, senior director of standards and excellence programs. And the organization’s website and internal technology infrastructure were rapidly approaching retirement age. “The site would go down, or our servers would go down, and we couldn’t do our work for hours,” says Hart. “Technology wasn’t seen as an integral part of the business.”

When Bell arrived, there was no unified membership department. “Processing, sending out renewals and customer service were handled in three different departments,” Vaughan recalls. Since membership dues were based on the size of a museum’s operating budget, there was an incentive to “self-discount,” or downplay budget size. In 2008, Bell assigned Vaughan to create a membership department and gave her the title of senior director of membership.

Vaughan adds that prior to Bell’s arrival, “there was no sense of urgency about anything. We were getting regular merit increases and bonuses each year,” regardless of AAM’s overall performance. “It felt a bit like the movie *Groundhog Day*. We had the same year for 20 years,” she says.



AAM’s new vice president of government relations & advocacy, Gail Ravnitzky Silberglied, launched the first field-wide Museums Advocacy Day in 2009, bringing several hundred museum directors and staffers to Washington to meet with lawmakers. The event began to build significant momentum. “We honor a Democrat and a Republican who have been good on issues related to arts and culture,” Bell says. “After the third or fourth year visiting senators and representatives and their staffers, they know you and they remember you. The largest single pot of money for museums in the federal budget is \$31 million for the Institute of Museum and Library Services. But museums have this major impact on the country: there are 850 million museum visits every year, which you can compare to 130 million annual visits to all professional sports games.”

“Our goal is to translate the societal importance that museums have into some increase in funding and support,” says Bell. AAM began to add staff members focused on advocacy.

Museums Advocacy Day participants plan for their visits to Capitol Hill.



By the summer of 2009, the seriousness of AAM’s predicament was becoming difficult to ignore. The board of directors gathered in Detroit that July. Bell had begun working to expand the board from 21 members to 27, and among those he added were trustees of museums and independent professionals with strategic, business, financial and other expertise. “We needed heterogeneous thinking on the board, not just museum directors,” he says.

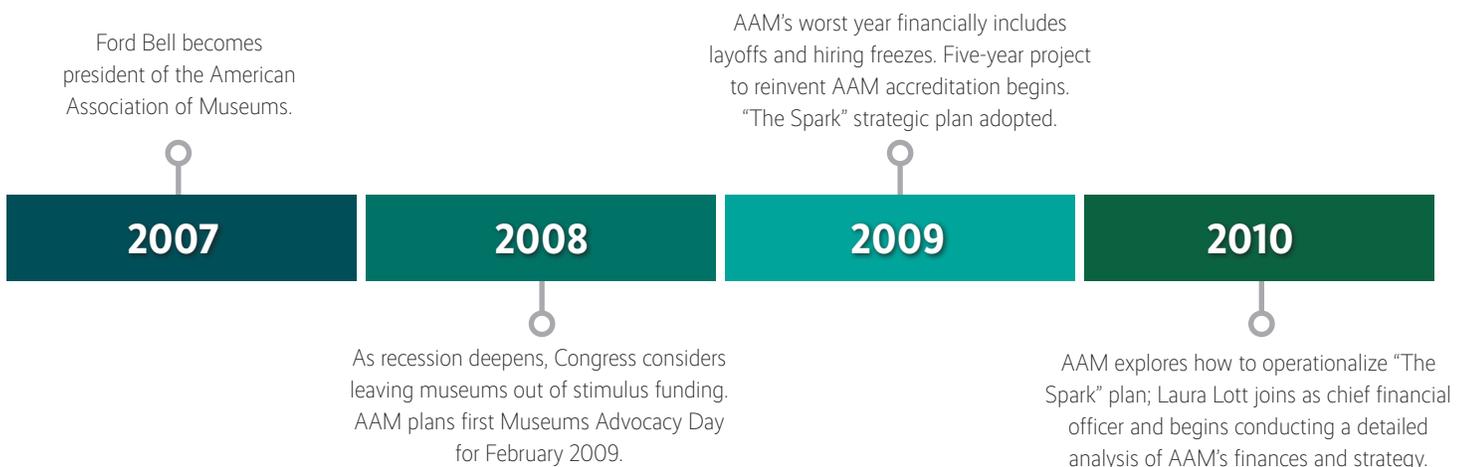
The board’s chair, Carl Nold of Historic New England, and its vice chair, Doug Myers of San Diego Zoo Global, also felt AAM needed a strategic plan. “They’d never done one before,” says Myers, right. “But everybody realized that with museums in free fall during the Great Recession, the association was just not sustainable.” Myers asked one of his team members, Chief Strategy Officer Beth Branning, to assist.

“A lot of the board members felt they knew what the membership wanted, what they would and wouldn’t stand for,” Branning recalls. “And the staff was saying, ‘We can’t do this or that.’ The strategic planning process was designed to keep them from jumping to conclusions, and actually talk to the membership and gather data about the jobs they wanted AAM to do—and where they felt it was falling short.”



Doug Myers served as vice chair and then chair of the AAM Board during the transition.

Timeline of Changes at AAM



Part of the problem was that some museums felt they got value from interacting with peers in their state or in their subject area, but as budgets tightened, “they just wondered what the role of a national organization was,” says Gary Johnson at the Chicago History Museum.

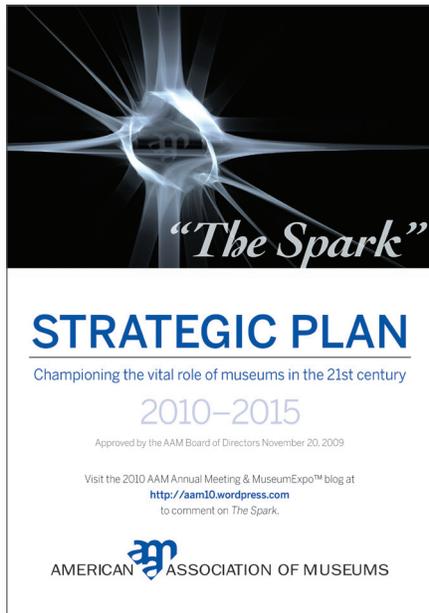
Johnson also says that the accreditation process, which certified that a museum’s policies, facilities and personnel were operating at an extremely high level, “was beginning to collapse. It wasn’t like being a university, where in order to give out degrees, you have to be accredited. Accreditation has to make a case for itself. And what had happened over the decades was that the process was like a snowball picking up things as it went down the hill. The list of requirements got bigger and bigger, and nothing was ever removed.” It wasn’t unusual for the process to stretch across three years or more. In addition to several thousand dollars of fees that AAM charged, jumping through the accreditation hoops “almost required hiring a new staff member, just because there was so much work involved,” Johnson says.

Kaywin Feldman, president of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and current AAM board chair, says that “it was painfully obvious” that the accreditation program needed an overhaul. “We just did not have many customers taking us up on it, and those who did just complained endlessly about the misery of the experience. Having done it twice, I’d put myself in that bucket,” Feldman says. In 2009, AAM announced a five-year project to reinvent accreditation.

A three-page strategic plan called “The Spark” was adopted in November 2009. It defined AAM’s mission: “to strengthen museums through leadership, advocacy,



collaboration and service.” It described beliefs (“museums strengthen communities”) and values (“integrity and inclusiveness”). It spelled out the need to build a more financially stable organization, make the accreditation process more accessible, and serve as a more vocal advocate for the field at the state and national levels.



It was hard to argue with the vision for the future that “The Spark” distilled: “We will champion the vital role of museums in the 21st century.”

But what exactly did that mean, and how would it happen?

Ever since Bell’s arrival, there had been talk of “the new AAM.” At headquarters, there were reorganizations and new metaphors for how the organization would work. “It felt like we were making tweaks to a broken system, rather than trying to fix what was broken,” says George. “We’d say, ‘OK, starting on this date, we’re going to try this new model,’ but we were still doing all of the same day-to-day tasks.”

Senior management’s offsite meetings never seemed to spur any real change, either. “Just do more of the same thing—that was

our motto,” says Hart.

Bell, too, recognized that the organization was having trouble changing its ways. “We were stuck with an old model,” he says. “You couldn’t just flog the horse harder and expect that it was going to get up.”

No one disagreed with “The Spark,” but AAM’s staffers were “struggling to figure out how to implement it,” says George. “We needed some kind of earthquake moment to shake things up.”



There was an incredible amount of work necessary to make that “earthquake moment” arrive. Board members and staff began working together to explore ways to operationalize “The Spark,” focusing on how to make membership more compelling and beneficial to a broader range of museums. And AAM engaged the consulting firm McKinsey & Company to diagnose some of the problems with accreditation, a program in which fewer than 5 percent of U.S. museums chose to participate.

Myers of San Diego Zoo Global was now chair of AAM’s board. “We gave the board members a lot of homework,” he says. Bell tasked one of his staffers, Auntaneshia

Staveloz, with supporting Myers and the other board members, and ensuring they were making progress in between board meetings.

In 2010, “I started doing a lot of cost cutting,” says Lott, “but it was really just nibbling around the edges. It felt like banging your head against the wall. We needed a big idea, but it was like, ‘What constitutes a big idea for a 104-year-old museum association?’”

A new senior director of information technology, Canan Abayhan, joined AAM in 2010, and even as Lott was looking to trim expenditures, the organization decided it had no choice but to make a major investment in technology infrastructure. “We just couldn’t run any longer on 10-year-old computers and servers,” says Lott.

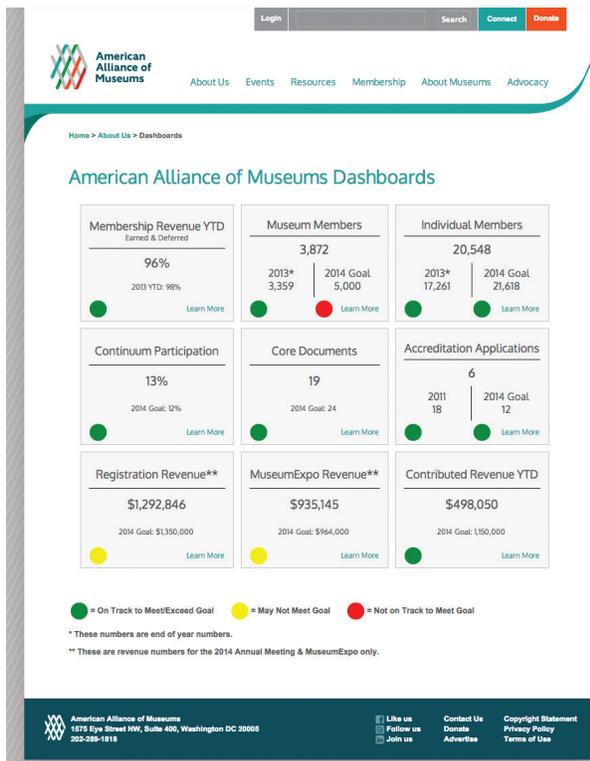
Abayhan says that when she arrived, many of AAM’s business processes still involved manually processing data from faxed or mailed forms. One example was onsite conference registrations, which required enormous amounts of staff time to process. And as Bell had discovered, real-time access to information about AAM’s finances was limited, as was information about membership numbers.

The organization had in the past felt constrained by IT’s limited capabilities. Bell and Abayhan realized that IT needed to support what the business wanted to achieve. The IT infrastructure “was like a house that had been built onto haphazardly over a few decades,” says Abayhan. “We had to tear it down and then rebuild it. But the good news was that there were no discussions about what to keep.”

Abayhan, Lott and Bell agreed that 2010 would be a year for stabilizing the existing IT systems, cutting costs through measures like backing up data offsite and enhancing the website’s functionality. The following year, though, was about designing and deploying an entirely new infrastructure.

Abayhan brought in new accounting software from Microsoft and an association management system from Aptify to drive the e-commerce functionality of the new website. Aptify would allow members to not only sign up on the website but complete tasks online like proposing annual meeting sessions. Most importantly, Aptify could be configured to support the new membership structure that was emerging. And the staff and board could get real-time data out of the system. Staff built a dashboard of key metrics on new members, lapsed members and organizations going through the accreditation process. “It became a great communication tool with the board, since

“We needed some kind of earthquake moment to shake things up.”



they can drill down into the numbers,” Abayhan says. (An example is at left.) Access to real-time information enabled AAM to become a more data-driven organization, letting leaders better consider the impact of proposed changes and monitoring their effects after implementation.

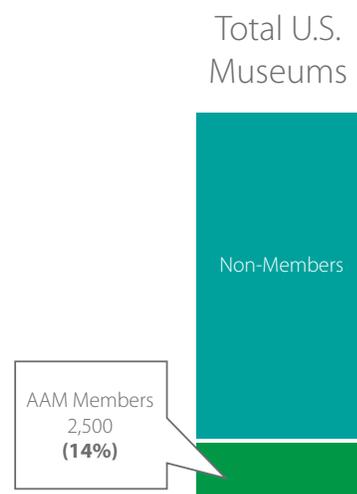
AAM also contracted with Shugoll Research to survey members and nonmembers, with the goal of understanding why they belonged—or didn’t. The 700 participants represented a solid response rate: about a quarter of the CEOs of current member organizations and 11 percent of nonmembers responded. The results were presented in July 2011.

The survey found that a big obstacle to attracting new members was the cost of membership, as was the “perception that AAM

better meets the needs of large museums. This is a particular challenge since most nonmembers are small museums.” Members said that they had trouble justifying the cost of AAM membership, and often felt forced to make either/or decisions about joining AAM or a regional or discipline-specific association. Nonmembers greatly underestimated the cost of joining—and even then thought the cost was too high.

The survey did find that members appreciated the level of customer service they got from AAM and the staff’s depth of knowledge. Members and nonmembers alike valued AAM for its resources on standards and best practices. They also said that a key reason for joining was the need for the museum field to speak with a single voice.

But the rather dispiriting bottom line, Shugoll explained, was that “a significant number of members and nonmembers say another association better meets their needs.”



That summer AAM’s board held a retreat at the San Diego Zoo’s Treetops dining room. Board member John Wetenhall, at the time president of the Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh, recalls a discussion about how to slightly improve the museum field’s representation by AAM. He said to the person sitting next to him, “We are asking exactly the wrong question. The right question is, how do we double or triple membership? Do we want incremental change or systemic change? What difference is 1 or 2 percent more members going to have on this organization?”

Wetenhall’s big question: “How do we make AAM membership a necessity, and not an option?”

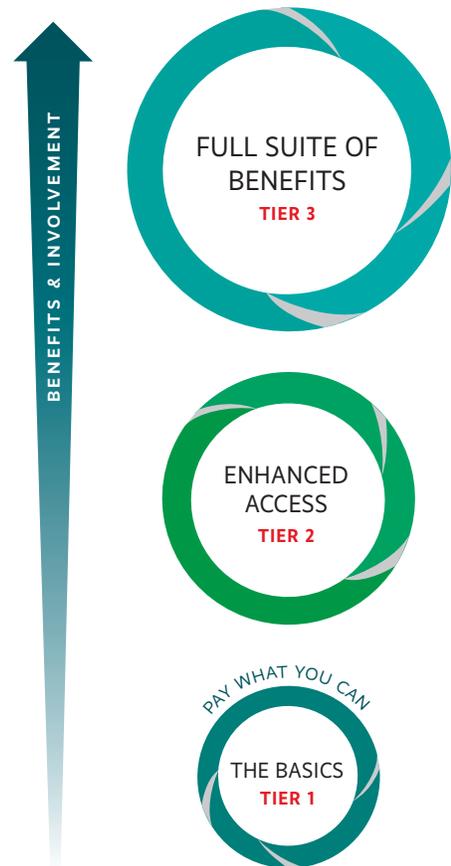


In 2012 AAM demonstrated unequivocally its commitment to systemic change. Everyone felt that the organization’s “earthquake moment” had finally happened in 2011; the following year was for building anew from the ground up, at a very fast pace. Why? There was consensus that changes occurring simultaneously would be most visible to the entire museum field, and would intensify the impact inside and outside AAM.

The biggest change was in the association’s core revenue stream: membership. Membership dues represented about 35 percent of AAM’s overall budget and were calculated using a one-size-fits-all approach, based on a museum’s self-reported operating budget. All museums received the same benefits, regardless of the amount they paid.

But in discussing how to dramatically grow the membership base so that AAM truly could say it represented the *entire* museum field, staffers and board members alike wondered about how to make belonging to AAM a “both/and” rather than an “either/or” proposition. The status quo was that museums would join either a regional or discipline-specific association or AAM, defining AAM as a rival to more than 60 smaller organizations.

Guided by survey findings, AAM broadened its membership options, creating three tiers so that museums could choose the level of benefits and engagement that



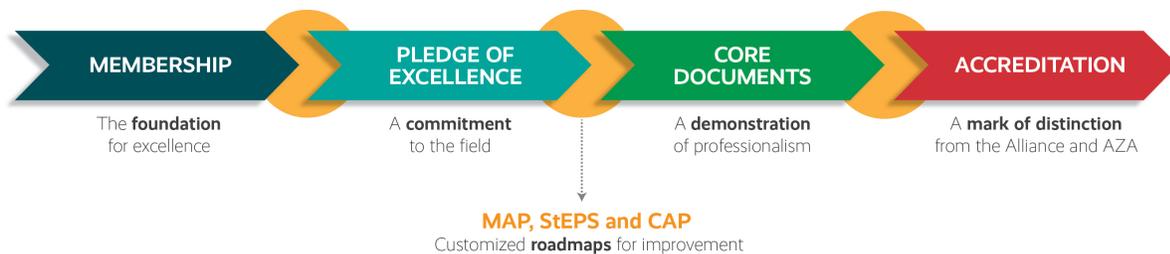
worked best for them. The top tier provided the most benefits, including free webinars, discounted registration to the annual meeting and an “all-staff” package option that gives the entire museum staff individual professional memberships; it was priced at \$150–\$5,000 a year based on a museum’s staff size, reducing dues by two-thirds for the largest museums and significantly for most others. The bottom tier, primarily offering access to e-mail newsletters and online resources that incurred nominal incremental costs, was launched as pay-what-you-can. AAM also eliminated separate fees for belonging to the professional networks and took more control of their management.

“The idea was to make membership as barrier free as possible,” says George. “You can give just \$1 to be a member.” Lott notes that the pay-what-you-can concept was borrowed from the museum field itself, where museums often host pay-what-you-can days or offer that option all the time.

AAM also devised the Continuum of Excellence, a series of stepping stones leading to accreditation. The very first step is membership: joining the professional community and gaining access to resources for improvement. The next step is free and available online: taking the Pledge of Excellence to “strive to operate according to national standards and best practices to the best of our abilities and in accordance with our resources.” Further steps include verifying possession of core documents, such as a disaster plan and code of ethics. The highest level of achievement on the journey is accreditation, involving a self-study process and an onsite visit by a committee of peers. The idea, starting with the online pledge, was to create a larger pipeline of institutions that might eventually seek accreditation. (See illustration below.)

The Continuum of Excellence

Supporting and celebrating your museum’s commitment to standards



All accreditation procedures moved online. Instead of filling binders with paper, museums could update documents such as a new mission statement or strategic plan as they developed them, making accreditation “an ongoing online activity,” says the Chicago History Museum’s Johnson, who helped revamp and simplify the program. The process can now be completed in 50 percent of the time previously required. “We didn’t want to dilute what it meant to be a fully accredited museum,” he says. “But now there’s a whole journey. A lot of museums could never be a Rolls-Royce, but they are a museum, and they’re proud to be part of a national field.” With the old models of membership and accreditation, Johnson says, smaller institutions “weren’t really welcomed.”

“Before, accreditation was the highest mountain peak that people could see in the distance,” says George. “It’s still a pinnacle and it’s hard to achieve. But once you know you can get there, and there’s a path to it, it’s less intimidating.”

AAM aimed to predict the impact of the changes on its revenues, but as with most models, there were plenty of built-in assumptions. At the board level, says Nik Honeysett, a board member and CEO of the Balboa Park Online Collaborative, “the conversation was, will everyone drift down to the pay-what-you-can tier and pay just \$1?”

Honeysett says that some board members “wanted guarantees that the decisions we were making were the right ones, that they would increase membership, which you couldn’t guarantee. It all came down to how committed are you, and how much do you believe these decisions will affect the organization’s ability to grow.”

Reducing the top dues level from \$15,000 to \$5,000 created “a lot of concern about making it up on volume,” says Bell, recalling one meeting in 2012. Bell committed to visiting and calling highest-level members and asking them to continue paying \$15,000 for two years as AAM made the transition. “I said, ‘You don’t have to, but I’m hoping that you will,’” he remembers. Forty-one said they would, providing a significant financial cushion during the transition to a more inclusive membership. Bell adds that when he talked to other heads of trade associations about lowering the price of AAM membership and introducing the pay-what-you-can level, a frequent refrain was, “You’re crazy. You need to up your dues to survive.”

Jay Younger, whose consulting firm McKinley Advisors was hired by AAM to help plan the communication rollout, recalls telling the staff and board leaders they were being “courageous.” He’d seen many organizations walk to the brink of introducing a free membership but hadn’t seen anyone actually do it.



As 2012 progressed, some worried that all of the organizational changes might not be visible enough to AAM’s current, past and prospective members. Bell liked to say that AAM was evolving from a trade association for museums to a champion for the cause of museums. AAM’s creative director, Susan Levine, had begun developing a new logo that encouraged her colleagues to mull the possibility of a rebranding. The board started to consider that question, and also whether the name American Association of Museums effectively captured the organization’s ambitions. They hired the communications agency Satori Engine to develop a new logo and new name to reflect the changes. (The Portland, Oregon firm agreed to do most of the work for AAM pro bono.) They considered names like the National Association of Museums and the United Museum Association before settling on the American Alliance of Museums, which would allow AAM to retain its initials. The word “alliance,” Lott wrote in an internal memo, “conveys our priority: we will unite the diverse elements of the field ... embracing people who work in, serve, do business with, volunteer for, collaborate with or just plain love museums.” To replace the old logo, a triad of interlocking letters, Satori Engine presented a new logo concept evoking colorful woven fabric.

“I was a very vocal proponent of a new graphic identity for the organization, not just a new logo,” says Feldman at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. “And having the new name and new identity roll out at the same time as these other things made people realize we were serious about change.” (Others weren’t sold immediately: some board members felt that with so many other changes, the last priority was altering the organization’s name.)

A lot was happening all at once, and the group that gathered regularly in the war room over the winter, spring and summer of 2012 felt it. All of the changes were

intertwined, Vaughan says, and so they all needed to happen together. “We were configuring a new technology system to support a membership program that was simultaneously being redesigned.”

Working with McKinley Advisors, AAM created a calendar for communicating the big launch in September. A detailed timeline for rolling out the new offerings and benefits ran all the way through October 2013. And in advance of the September 2012 launch, there were briefings and webinars for key volunteer leaders and partners about the planned changes, along with one-on-one phone calls with individuals who had previously criticized or challenged the proposals. Staffers and board members alike received talking points to help them explain the changes clearly and stay on message.

The new name and new logo first surfaced in late August 2012, when the old website was replaced. Vaughan describes the old site, with more than 2,000 pages, as “an overgrown, unweeded garden.” The new site, built with help from the design agency Bean Creative, was much simpler and more streamlined, uniting three previously stand-alone sites. Vaughan says launching during the lull of late August was necessary because “we had to move the site into a live environment to be sure it was stable before the launch on September 5.”

There wasn’t any promotion of the changeover at first, but blogger Lee Rosenbaum, better known as CultureGrrl, was among those who noticed the new site almost as soon as it went live. The AAM homepage displayed the new “woven” logo, along with the copy, “The Association is now The Alliance. Find out more Sept. 5.” Rosenbaum wrote:

Already, a few commenters on AAM’s Facebook and Twitter pages are wondering “what the heck is this all about?”, why this change in identity to “American Alliance of Museums” wasn’t made in consultation with AAM’s membership, and why there’s been no formal announcement. One perplexed AAMer thought the dramatically transformed website might have been commandeered by hackers!

So what exactly IS going on with the premier association for U.S. museums of all stripes (not just art museums)? Is this just some marketing genius’ dubious rebranding gambit, or are substantive changes afoot?

Some at AAM started to second-guess the decision to make all of the changes at once. “Everyone was nervous,” says Lott. “People wondered whether we should

re-evaluate some of it. But we reminded ourselves we had spent a lot of time and effort thinking it all through.” Then the mass mailings and e-mails started going out to AAM’s constituents.



Once the first of the major changes rolled out in September, the reaction of the museum field was overwhelmingly positive. “The check is—literally—in the mail,” Minnesota Zoo CEO Lee Ehmke wrote in an e-mail to Vaughan. “We are pleased to be joining AAM, and congratulate you and Ford for the innovative restructuring of your membership process that makes it possible for us to do this.” The zoo had never before been a member.

Wednesdays at AAM became Membership Wednesdays for about seven weeks, with employees reaching out to prospective or lapsed members.

Max van Balgooy wrote in his blog for historic sites: “Those of us in the history field often felt like outsiders at AAM, which seemed to be dominated by art museums, our classier and richer cousins. But take a look at the new AAM and you may find two major changes that may appeal to history organizations” (referring to the Continuum of Excellence as an inclusive process of professionalization and the tiered membership structure).

“Love the name change and what it represents,” wrote Dan Keegan, director of the Milwaukee Art Museum. Others praised the streamlining of the accreditation process. Nearly 100 museums joined AAM in the two months following the relaunch—and almost 1,700 in the next two years.

Board members like Myers took it upon themselves to personally communicate the changes to their peers. “I’d say, at San Diego Zoo Global, we bought the Tier 3 package, but I’ll put \$25 in for you, and you’re a member,” Myers says. “And the person would say, ‘No, no, I’ll put in \$100.’” AAM had expected the typical Tier 1, pay-what-you-can member to pony up about \$25, but Vaughan says the average is about \$80. “A lot of museums interpret it as, ‘Pay as much as you can,’ which is great,” she says.

Launch events to explain and celebrate the changes were hosted by board members in major cities throughout the fall, including one on September 6 at the

National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, DC.

Wednesdays at AAM became Membership Wednesdays for about seven weeks, with employees reaching out to prospective or lapsed members. “The boardroom was set up as a call center on these days,” explains Lott. “We tried to have a pep rally-type kickoff each Wednesday, and celebrated the number of calls, the number of museums converted to members, and any feedback or stories we heard from museums we were calling.” A staff member drew a big map of the U.S. for the boardroom wall, and photos of newly recruited museums were attached to it. (The membership department still devotes Wednesdays to making proactive membership calls.)

In hindsight, Lott says, the organization may have left behind the old brand too abruptly. “We needed months of transition,” she says. “We had members lapsing because they literally didn’t recognize our communications. Also, they had to evaluate multiple options instead of just the yes/no decision to join.” So in part the Membership Wednesday calls were a way of explaining the changes and helping museums choose the membership tier that worked best.

After the September 2012 launch, there were other key milestones to “continue to surprise and delight our members,” as Lott puts it: a redesigned *Museum* magazine, enhancements to AAM’s website, salary surveys, and new directories and databases online. AAM also created a print calendar that featured photos of its staff, serving as an ever-present reminder of the organization, its new brand and the people working on museums’ behalf.

By 2012, AAM was again operating in the black—just barely—after four consecutive money-losing years. In 2013, AAM netted \$530,000, its biggest surplus in more than a decade. And in the first year after the “earthquake moment,” AAM membership increased by 34 percent, not only reversing a dozen years of decline, but setting a new record. AAM was surprised that more members than it had expected were enrolling at the highest level. Staff had expected about 23 percent of all members to join at the lowest tier; in reality, just 13 percent did.

“What Ford did was create a grassroots for AAM, which had been missing,” says Johnson at the Chicago History Museum.

By 2013, AAM had gone from representing 15 percent of all U.S. museums to about 20 percent. As Wetenhall put it, “We’re now starting to serve the field rather than the few.” But there was more work to do, like encouraging more museums to “climb the staircase” toward accreditation. Bell saw international reach as a new area of emphasis, working to bring more international museums to the annual meeting, and

"Membership is a means to an end.
The goal is a stronger museum field."

to create new collaborations in places such as China, Brazil and Saudi Arabia.

AAM has become an emblem of transformational change and

innovation in the world of associations, fielding calls and e-mails from others in the field who are considering new strategies of their own. At conferences for association professionals, AAM is often held up as a successful case study. But within AAM, there is acknowledgment that this shouldn't be a one-time metamorphosis; the organization needs to stay close to its membership and attuned to their needs. As Lott sees it, the very nature of being an association is continuing to change: "Millennials don't pay dues and they aren't so interested in the idea of joining something in the traditional sense, so how can we be sustainable as an organization? One thing that's next for us is figuring out how to reach all 17,000-plus museums in the U.S. and create value for them and for their staffs, aside from membership. Membership is a means to an end. The goal is a stronger museum field."

Part of what drove the reinvention of AAM was urgency. As Honeysett says, "the biggest risk is not to do anything at all." But there was also the new leadership's sense that the organization needed to abandon its "utility mindset," thinking of itself as an entity like the gas or cable bill that simply had to be paid. The new mentality was focused on listening to—and serving—the highest-priority needs that members described. Over the decades, a feeling of entitlement had settled over AAM. But the attitude throughout the organization now is that, in George's words, "we are about making museums more successful for their communities."

Employees led the transformation, with assists from consultants and outside vendors, thereby gaining a new sense of empowerment. Both staffers and executives describe the internal culture change at AAM as radical—shifting from maintenance of fiefdoms and the status quo to collaborative work. People are "encouraged to think big and try things," in Lott's words.

"It was a really magical time in the fall and into 2013," says Myers. "We caught this thing at the bottom, and by working together we turned it around."

Case Study Lessons

AAM successfully implemented multiple major organizational changes at once. Although the groundwork for change was laid over several years, AAM took less than a year to go from concept to new brand launch, technology infrastructure rebuild and tiered membership paradigm creation. Typically such changes are spread over several years and phased in sequentially. AAM's changes, however, had a dramatic impact precisely because they happened in short sequence. For AAM, this strategy created tremendous efficiencies as well. At its simplest, redesigning and reprinting the membership materials to reflect both the program changes and the new brand meant doing it only once.

AAM did three key things to make this large-scale, fast-paced change successful:

1. Identify change agents

AAM's leadership was deliberate in identifying key staff at all levels of the organization and with various lengths of service—from 20 years of employment to new hires—to play critical roles in carrying out the organizational changes. These staff members were explicitly coached. They understood from the beginning that they were being counted on as change agents and expected to play a pivotal role in the success of AAM's reinvention. They would also serve as inspiration for other staff, helping them to get excited about and engaged in the changes happening across the organization. The change agent group met regularly as equals to coordinate many moving parts. They read articles on change management and discussed how to help ease the anxiety of colleagues. Occasionally they participated in what came to be known as "liquid teambuilding"—critical informal time when they were able to commiserate, share fears and think unconventionally at the local pub.

2. Empower staff to think creatively

AAM is often asked what consulting firm helped develop the radical ideas and changes that were ultimately implemented. The reality is that the best ideas came from within, with lots of shaping from AAM's volunteers, members and other constituents (more on that below). The leadership at AAM made it clear that no idea was too radical; nothing was off the table. Innovative and unconventional—even counterintuitive—solutions to

AAM's challenges were prized. With this invitation and a few models of bold thinking, the culture shifted. Staff members who had been waiting to be told what to do now took the initiative in promoting change and innovation. Those who had once clung to the status quo embraced new thinking and developed pride in efficient and effective changes. Departments also became more interdependent. As a result, staff were more accountable to themselves and to each other, not wanting to let their colleagues down.

3. Communicate. Communicate. Communicate more.

Potential changes were shared, thoughtfully but broadly, at all levels of the organization as they were being contemplated. Testing out new ideas refined details of the changes, clarified the ultimate communication about the "new" AAM and, perhaps most importantly, built confidence among the leadership and staff that they were on the right track. This growing confidence fueled the momentum of change and innovation. Of course, longtime volunteers and supporters of the organization were given a preview of the changes before they launched publicly. There was also a strategy to offer a sneak preview of the changes to those who had been most critical of the organization in the past. In the end, it worked to have multiple champions across the country who understood the changes in more depth and could help counter the skepticism and criticism that would inevitably follow major changes at a 106-year old organization.



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